

**RALPH WALDO
EMERSON, MAN
AND TEACHER**

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Ralph Waldo Emerson, man and teacher by Anonymous

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**RALPH WALDO
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The Round Table Series

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

MAN AND TEACHER

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THE aim of this Series is to give expression to the views of a number of writers, who, while representing divers and even antagonistic schools of thought, desire to give temperate and reasoned statements of their beliefs. The earlier numbers will be studies of the teachings of eminent modern authors, and of these the projectors of the scheme hope to be able to issue a fairly comprehensive series.

To seek the Grail *rode forth the knights of old*
Of Arthur's Table Round, nor did they fail,
Wholly or all, who went, those champions bold,

To seek the Grail.

The GRAIL we seek is Truth—nor bought nor sold
In any mart; nay, Strength may not avail,
But Purity and Faith; and, as they told

Who wrought the olden legend, so we hold—
None wholly here succeed—none wholly fail,
So through the world's wide kingdoms we are bold

To seek the Grail.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON.

THE human trinity, like the Divine, has its vicissitudes of prominence, and, as the Puritan worshipped the God of Judgment and Righteousness, the Evangelical the Man-God of Intercession and Forgiveness, and the Mystic the informing and comforting Spirit, so we have ages and classes of men to whom the physical, the intellectual, and emotional sides of our nature have seemed in turn most worthy of attention and culture. And, as in matters theological it is a rare thing to find a true Athanasian to whom no person of the deity "is afore or after other," so it is seldom we find a man whose culture and development are thoroughly well-balanced and rounded. We see the athlete, who amazes us with feats of strength and grace of movement, woefully deficient in brain-power and in force of character; so may we find the man of intellect defective in physical and moral force and activity, and most worthy and even noble persons whose intellectual and bodily powers hardly escape contempt. Or, again, we may find vigour, health, and clear-headedness combined with a nature but ill developed on the moral and emotional sides. Natures thus thrown out of symmetry seem to be parts rather than wholes, and afflict us with a sense of defect and deformity; even as gorgeous hot-house plants miss

the grace and charm that greet us in many a wayside weed. When, therefore, we do meet a character in which at least there is a brave striving after due balance of development, we seem at last to have come face to face with true humanity. Such an one, to a large extent, we take Emerson to have been.

We must go back to Spinoza, "first cousin" (as Heine calls him) "of Jesus Christ," before we can find a character to compare for its startling purity and self-fidelity to that of Emerson. With such grace, as of Greek athlete, does the soul of this man move before us, that we seem to rub our eyes as though so perfect a presentment could not but be a dream, and a dream of divine imagination. We long, like the unbelieving Thomas, for tangible proof of his existence, and in spiritual and moral affairs the most tangible thing is a fault. How real and dear a juvenile *faux pas* would have made him! Why, the infatuated man actually paid his way and died solvent like any dullard! Oh for an account of some childish tantrum, some boyish escapade, some adolescent indiscretion! But no: no such concession do his biographers seem able to make to the human passion for frailty; he seems to swing clear of the ordinary dilemmas and impediments of life like a planet in free space. Born, he seems, finally to gainsay, with, alas, so few co-witnesses, the doctrine of human depravity, to raise once more aloft over the struggling hosts of humanity the banner of the ideal life, often trampled so rudely under the feet of divine genius itself. In many respects, doubtless, he was fortunate; born under a star of spiritual and even temporal prosperity. Yet the very purity of his nurture and surroundings made his moral successes the more difficult and the more truly signal. His

was, to the onlooker at least, no crude choice of Hercules between voluptuous vice and pronounced, self-proclaiming virtue; it was rather the far subtler decision between a noble and a yet nobler course, a high and a still higher virtue. Yet it is possible that to his keen spiritual perceptions the contrast was broad and clear, and that he plainly enough saw the devil, though in the likeness of an angel of light. That the secret of his success was his utter and sensitive integrity, the absolute readiness and precision with which he obeyed the spiritual helm, admits not of cavil. Throughout he kept himself not merely *sceleris purus*, but *integer vita*. He trusted implicitly the dictates of his soul, and, as he says himself, "the soul may be trusted to the end." And so well from his youth up had he obeyed this divine helm that he seems to have required no acute spiritual crisis—to have "come round to the wind" in a fine curve rather than by sharp tacking; his soul's career being rather on the type of Buddha's and Christ's than of Paul's and Augustine's. He, as they, needing not so much conversion as enlightening and development, there being in such cases no *μετάνοια*, no repentance of former ways, but rather a "putting off of childish things." What was doubtless the crisis of Emerson's life, the assertion of his spiritual manhood, is marked by his resignation of the charge of Second Church, Boston. With a delicacy of moral perception, alas, lamentably rare, he had become aware that, in spite of the large surface of contact still existing between his spirit and the religious body he belonged to and instructed, it was no longer for his soul's health to maintain that position, and with a fine faith, which we trust may ere long be less exceptional, he believed no

good could come to others from a falsity, however slight and pardonable it might seem. Without any posing as hero or martyr, he quietly resigned his charge, with a child-like faith in the security of his own future—a faith beautifully justified. Yet it would probably be highly unjust to suppose that this separation, so calmly accomplished, cost him no pang, or was decided upon without sharp inward struggle. For it seems impossible that a young man could quit a calling for which he had been trained, and for which, to say the least, he was far more eminently fitted than the majority of those who enter on it; could incur the suspicion or occasion the reproach of his flock, and could face a new and uncertain career without sufferings keen, though unbetrayed. It is, indeed, more difficult and painful to break through ties of affection and sympathy, and to give occasion for doubts and fears in those we love, than it is to stand singly forth against an unappreciative and hostile world, even at the risk of scorn, persecution and death. Well did the Carpenter of Nazareth know this when he said, "He that leaveth not father and mother is not worthy of me." We cannot doubt then, that, devoid of dramatic effect and effort as Emerson's secession from the church of his fathers was, it was an action demanding thorough manliness of heart, nor even lacking in the elements of heroism. Not but that he had his consolation, if indeed he was made at the time aware of it, in the faith in his character with which he had already inspired those who could most closely note his conduct; for it was some time after this juncture that Father Taylor said :¹—

¹ Quoted in "Ralph Waldo Emerson : his Life, Writings, and Philosophy, by George Willis Cooke."